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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ABUJA 000153

SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: NIGERIA: CLASH OVER LAND CLAIMS LIVES IN TARABA

Classified by Ambassador Howard F. Jeter. Reasons 1.5 (b) and (d).

11. (U) During the January 5-6 weekend, communal violence in Taraba State between Fulani cattle herders and ethnic Kakawa farmers claimed at least 25 lives, perhaps as many as 50. The locus of the fighting was Gembu, Sardauna Local Government.

12. (C) During a January 8 conversation, Taraba State Governor Nyame told Emboffs that the melee was the outgrowth of a contest over land use. Friction was inherent between cattle herders and farmers when land runs scarce, he claimed. As the dry season progressed, tensions escalated. Grazing land had become parched and unable to sustain livestock. Searching to feed their animals, herders drove the cattle closer to the streams where the herds could feed on the vegetation still growing because of its proximity to water. Unfortunately, many farms lay near the water for the same reason. As cattle were driven through the area, they began to eat the crops, according to Nyame. Enraged by the herders' perceived encroachment and fearing decimation of their crops by hungry cattle, some farmers struck back, Nyame continued.

13. (C) Unfortunately, the division of labor along ethnic lines in this rural community only exacerbated the tension, according to the Governor. The vast majority of cattle herders were Fulani while most farmers were of Kakawa stock. The Kakawa consider themselves indigenes and resent the Fulani as immigrants. However, the Fulani tend to be more prosperous and have come to dominate the politics and economy of the area. This Fulani dominance has stirred bitterness among the Kakawa, Nyame said. (Comment: taxes on cattle provide the major source of indigenous revenue to the Sardauna LGA. Subsistence farmers are not taxed, so ethnic issues aside, the LGA would have an incentive to increase cattle numbers at the expense of farms. End comment.)

14. (C) The Fulani's relative prosperity has brought more and more cattle into the area and a concomitant need for additional grazing land. Because of the finite amount of suitable land, the farmers realize that more grazing means less farming. Seeing themselves on the wrong side of this dynamic, the farmers feel their lands, their way of life, and their role in local affairs are being imperiled. Moreover, the Kakawa have also felt slighted because the traditional ruler in the area is Fulani and not one of their own. Although terribly wrong-minded, their resort to violence was not to seek dominance but an act born of political weakness and desperation. It was an attempt to do something to halt the further erosion of their status, Nyame contended. (Comment: Media reports lend credence to the view that the clash had economic and political dimensions extending beyond the actual land in dispute. According to the January 7 "New Nigerian", several prominent local Fulani leaders were among those attacked and killed in what appears to be a premeditated plan. Nyame also told us a very prosperous Fulani businessman, who employed many Kakawa, had his office burned down. End comment.)

15. (C) Nyame added that another factor contributing to the belligerent mood was that traders and herders from Cameroon were trundling across the international boundary to set up in the area, which is less than 10 miles away from the border. The growing Cameroonian presence not only intensified the competition for resources but deepened the sense of loss felt by the Kakawa due to incursion by "foreigners."

16. (C) The area was now calm, Nyame stated. In a public statement, Taraba State Police Commissioner Egbe Njom said that they held nearly 50 suspects who claim to have been hired by one of the sides in the conflict. (Comment: Njom's statement contradicts an assertion the Governor made to us

that he did not believe "mercenaries" were involved in the fracas. End comment.)

17. (C) Nyame claimed he was very disappointed by the violence as he considered the Sardauna Local Government Area one of the best in his state. Asked how he could prevent repeat violence, Nyame stated he would take three steps. First, he would seek to gerrymander one or two additional local governments out of the present one (this would require State Assembly approval). In that way, the Kakawa could have a Local Government (and resources) that they would control. Second, he would establish a Kakawa "traditional ruler." Nyame believed bestowing this recognition would reduce Kakawa ire by elevating them to the same status as the Fulani who have a local traditional ruler. Third, he would increase dialogue between moderate Fulani and Kakawa. By bolstering the moderates, he hoped to lessen the influence of hot heads on both sides.

18. (C) Comment: The conflict between herders and farmers over scarce land is being played out in many Nigerian communities. As in Taraba, many of these perennial disputes have ethnic ramifications and also have transgressed into the political arena -- with rival ethnic groups seeking control of their local government, and each group trying to exclude the other. Unfortunately, as we move deeper into the dry season, more of these simmering disputes likely may erupt into violence. It will take mutually acceptable resolution of land use disputes in each area to diminish these problems. However, these compromises are difficult to achieve and slow to take shape. And meanwhile, the best the GON can do will be to respond quickly to any reported outbreaks in hopes of keeping them from spreading and claiming too many casualties. What Taraba State Governor Nyame has done in his state seems to be a positive way forward.
Jeter